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ABSTRACT

This booklet, one of a series featuring the Canadian provinces, presents a brief overview of Northwest Territories and is suitable for teacher reference or student reading. Separate sections discuss geography, history and people, land claims, the economy, the government, and recreation and the arts. Specific topics include the expansive size and extreme climate of the Northwest Territories, the early settlement of native peoples and European explorers, and the unique history of law enforcement in the region. Reference is made to the controversial Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry, which in recent years has raised a variety of issues concerning the rights of the native people in the Northwest Territories. The small scale economy is described as heavily reliant on mineral exploration and a growing communications industry. Industrial development is seen as threatening to the native economy and way of life, which leads to a discussion of the role of the territorial government and its responsibilities to the rights of northerners, conservation of wildlife, and preservation of cultural identity. The final section describes three national parks, traditional forms of northern recreation, and the growing handicraft business in the region. In addition, a simple map showing Canada's major cities and provinces is included. (LH)

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The Northwest Territories

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Canada's North invariably leaves a searing impression on anyone who has been there. First there is its size — some of the Arctic Islands alone are larger than several European countries. To travel across its expanse from east to west in a small plane is to be airborne for 24 hours. Then, the landscape — dense forests, awesome glaciers, rugged mountains and half of Canada's fresh water. Also there is a profusion of life which belies the widespread desolation: over 800 known flowering plants, more than 75 species of bird as well as the familiar caribou, polar bear, musk-oxen and whales.

Canada, north of 60° latitude has two immense territories, the Northwest Territories (N.W.T.) and the Yukon Territory. The Northwest Territories cover 3,246,400 square kilometres, some 35 per cent of Canada (the second biggest country in the world). From the 60th parallel in the south the N.W.T. stretch 3,560 kilometres to the North Pole, and 4,256 kilometres from east to west.

Geography

It is a land of stunning contrasts, a reflection in part of its geographical areas. The N.W.T. can be divided fairly neatly into taiga and tundra. The taiga is the broad boreal forest that covers the world's sub-Arctic zone. The tundra is the windswept, rocky Arctic region, where the cold climate has stunted vegetation; trees do not grow there. In the N.W.T., the treeline separates these two areas as it runs southeast from the Mackenzie River delta on the Beaufort Sea to the border with the province of Manitoba at Hudson Bay.

One of the most remarkable features of the N.W.T. is the Mackenzie River, one of the world's longest at 4,241 kilometres. It drains an area of approximately 1,812,992 square kilometres in three provinces and two territories and accommodates barge navigation from Hay River north to the Arctic Ocean. Much more barge navigation took place before the opening of the Mackenzie Highway in 1961.

Average January temperatures in the N.W.T. range from -25°C at Hay River to -36°C at Eureka. Average July temperatures range from 4°C in the Arctic Archipelago to 16°C in the Mackenzie Basin. Precipitation is slight. The annual snowfall in the Arctic can be as little as 30 centimetres, the equivalent of a single Montreal snow storm.

The climate and the landscape have long been a hindrance to transportation in the North. Long dependent on dog sled and water transportation, the N.W.T. took a giant leap toward development with the arrival of the bush plane. Because of the geography, ground transportation is much more difficult. An important milestone, however, in 1979 was the completion of the Dempster Highway connecting the Mackenzie Delta with Dawson in the

Yukon. There are eight territorial highways in all, covering roughly 2,000 kilometres.

History and people

The earliest settlement of the Americas occurred probably between 25,000 and 30,000 years ago, when Asians crossed the Bering Strait land bridge. This migration brought forth many early Indian cultures. The ancestors of the Athabascan Indians of northwestern North America are believed to have come from eastern Asia some 10,000 to 14,000 years ago. A third migration about 5,000 years ago is thought to have brought the ancestors of the Eskimo peoples, now known as the Inuit, "the people".

Canada's northern Inuit descend directly from the Thule culture, which was famous for its whale-hunting skill.

Today, the North is the home of many indigenous cultures, which have survived an inhospitable climate for thousands of years. Their survival depended on skills as travellers, hunters and gatherers. The network of social systems is complex.

The Indians of the Mackenzie Valley and the Western Arctic are part of the Athabascan language and culture group. They are separated into the Kutchin (or Loucheux), Hare, Slavey, Dogrib and Chipewyan. The Athabascan people are one of the most widely dispersed groups of Indians in North America. In addition to the Indians of the Northwest Territories and the northern Yukon, they include the Koyukon and Tanana of Alaska, the Tutchone of the southern Yukon, the Beaver and Carrier of British Columbia, and the Navaho and Apache of the southwest United States, among others. Collectively, northern Indians call themselves the Dene, "the people".

The native peoples also include the Inuit, all of whom, from Siberia to eastern Greenland, speak dialects of the same language. There are, nevertheless, important social and technological differences among the various groups — the Inuvialuit, the Copper Eskimos, the Netsilik, the Aivilik and Igloolik — such as patterns of land use, dialect and hunting techniques.

During the past 150 years, the Métis have joined the Dene and Inuit as one of the groups now included among "northern native people". The Métis trace their ancestry to the unions between the "coureurs de bois" (the French Canadian trappers and explorers) and Indian women in the early days of the fur trade. Other Métis are the descendants of unions between Hudson's Bay Company men — mainly of Scottish origin — and Dene women. (The children of these unions usually intermarried with the original Dene inhabitants.)

European contact with the northern peoples began as early as 1508 with Sebastian Cabot, who was seeking the Northwest Passage to Asia. Other

British explorers who followed included Martin Frobisher, Sir John Franklin, Samuel Hearne and Alexander Mackenzie. The fur companies (the Hudson's Bay Company and the Northwest Company) established the first European settlements in the North.

Despite the many expeditions from which Britain drew its claim to the North, huge tracts remained unknown. In 1870, Britain transferred to the new Canadian government all Rupert's Land and the North West Territory. In 1880, Queen Victoria declared that the islands of the Arctic Archipelago were also to become part of Canada. It was not until the end of the century, however, that the Canadian government commissioned Captain Joseph Elzéar Bernier of Quebec to make the first of three Arctic voyages to take "formal possession of all lands and islands" on behalf of Canada. By 1912 the Northwest Territories assumed their present dimension.

In this century, the Canadian government has established Royal Canadian Mounted Police posts, weather stations, post offices, defence installations and medical and communications facilities throughout the North. In recent years, resource exploration and environmental protection have especially added to the national presence.

The North has always attracted and been home to a hardy breed of people. Much of the Northwest Territories' development since the turn of the century has been a chronicle of these rugged individualists — men and women whose ancestors settled the North, and more recent arrivals in scarlet jackets, black robes and the leather headgear of the bush pilot.

The history of law enforcement in the Northwest Territories has been unique. In the wake of the Klondike gold fever came the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, whose dog team patrols became legendary. So important were the RCMP that the commissioner of the force was also commissioner of the territory from 1905 to 1919.

In the territory's recent history, the names Sissons and Morrow have earned a special place in the North. Mr. Justice Jack Sissons, at 63, became the first judge of the New Territorial Court in 1963. He and his successor, Mr. Justice William Morrow took the justice that had been imported from the south and gave it a northern face. Justice Morrow packed a pistol and a bottle of rye whiskey (to protect him against northern predators and the cold) when travelling his lonely circuit. They used a bush plane to take the judicial system to the very homes of the native people, and bent the law to the needs of a unique northern culture. Sissons became known to the Inuit as Ekoktoegee, "The One Who Listens to Things". At present the judiciary consists of a Supreme Court judge and three territorial judges, two in Yellowknife and one in Hay River.

Land claims

Mr. Justice Sissons' Inuit name could easily have been applied to another southern judicial man who was sent north by the government in Ottawa. In 1974 Mr. Justice Thomas Berger was named to head a one-man commission of inquiry into a proposed oil pipeline along the Mackenzie Valley, running south from the Mackenzie Delta on the Beaufort Sea to the Alberta border. Mr. Justice Berger visited all 35 communities — from Sachs Harbour to Old Crow — in the Western Arctic and heard evidence from nearly 1,000 northerners. In 1977 he recommended that no gas pipeline or energy corridor be built along the Mackenzie Valley for ten years, to brace the North for the expected economic, environmental and cultural shock and to give the national government time to settle native claims.

The Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry became the focus for a debate that has recently come to the fore in the North and elsewhere in Canada: the rights of Canada's native peoples. The Inuit, Indians and Métis of the Northwest Territories claim to have aboriginal rights to the land, rights not extinguished by treaty, as elsewhere in Canada. What the northern native people seek is self-determination and control over their lands and resources. Mr. Justice Berger put it this way: "The native people of the North now insist that the settlement of native claims must be seen as a fundamental reordering of their relationship with the rest of us. Their claims must be seen as the means to establishing a social contract based on a clear understanding that they are distinct peoples in history."

Four organizations represent the native people of the Northwest Territories. They are the Inuit Tapirisat of Canada, the Dene Nation, the Committee for Original Peoples' Entitlement and the Métis Association of the Northwest Territories. Apart from the traditional elements of land and compensation, the claims submitted by these groups are for political control of one kind or another ranging from local municipal government to separate territorial status. Each reflects the claimant's concern for self-determination and the preservation of cultural identity; they call for a change in the way northern lands and resources are used, conserved, developed and lived in. The claims affect vital issues of language, hunting, fishing, trapping, game management and environmental protection.

The federal government, in response to these claims, has agreed to negotiate settlements with native groups in those areas of Canada where any native rights based on traditional use and occupancy had not been extinguished by treaty or superseded by law. This policy acknowledges that settlement of the

North by non-natives had often ignored native rights and that the interests of the native people must be taken into consideration in opening the North to development.

The economy

The economy of the Northwest Territories is of a small scale considering the immensity of the land. Its potential, however, is awesome. The North as a whole is estimated to contain 40 per cent of Canada's non-renewable resources. It now produces 100 per cent of the country's tungsten, 44 per cent of its lead, 26 per cent of its zinc, 20 per cent of its silver and 13 per cent of its gold. Copper and cadmium are also mined extensively.

In 1979, $437-million worth of mining production sales were registered in the Northwest Territories, representing 97 per cent of total commodity production. Some 1,750 persons are employed in the mining industry. (Manufacturing is non-existent and the service sector depends mostly on government salaries.) The search for metals has fallen off slightly in recent years, although uranium exploration has continued at high levels.

Oil and gas exploration boomed in the Northwest Territories during the Seventies. The two most significant explorations at present are Dome Petroleum's offshore Beaufort Sea project and Panarctic Oil's drilling in the Arctic Islands. The cost of exploration runs into hundreds of millions of dollars. Oil production in 1979 (at Norman Wells) was estimated at 340,000 barrels. Estimated gas production for 1979 was 250 million cubic metres, from Norman Wells and Pointed Mountain.

The federal government has a large stake in northern oil and gas exploration. For example, Petro-Canada, a state company, is part of a consortium whose Arctic Pilot Project is expected to produce 7.5 million cubic metres of natural gas a day. The gas will be transported by pipeline 160 kilometres across Melville Island and then by tanker/icebreaker through northern waters to an east coast port.

The extent of other economic activity pales in comparison to that of mineral exploitation. The net value of commercial fishing, trapping and forest industries is about $3 million, less than the revenue generated by liquor sales.

These renewable resources, however, are of epic importance. The native population lives in a difficult but harmonious relationship with the land and has done so for thousands of years. A minority of that population still chooses to practise a subsistence living and the implications of massive development and modern technology concern these people deeply. While they do not reject twentieth century industrial development they would like to see it strengthen, rather than overwhelm, the native economy and life.

The communications industry in the Northwest Territories is growing. Many communities receive radio and television programs from the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. The CBC stations at Yellowknife, Inuvik, Frobisher Bay and Rankin Inlet, broadcast northern programming (in addition to national fare) which can be heard in English and, to a lesser extent, in Inuktitut (the language of the Inuit), Dogrib, Slavey, Chipewyan, Inuvialookton, Hareskin and Loucheux.

Government

Under the Northwest Territories Act, a commissioner is appointed by the federal Cabinet to act as chief executive officer. While subject to the instructions of the government and the Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs, in practice the commissioner is responsive to the wishes of the Council. He is assisted by a deputy commissioner and seven elected members of the Legislative Assembly, who together with the commissioner, form an executive committee. In September 1967 the commissioner and a small nucleus of territorial public servants took up residence in Yellowknife, the newly-designated seat of government. Since then a full-fledged public service with eight departments and four regional offices — at Fort Smith, Inuvik, Rankin Inlet and Frobisher Bay — has developed.

The Legislative Assembly of the Territories comprises a 22-member Council, nine of whom are Inuit, eight white, three Métis and two Indian. In general, the commissioner in council has the power to legislate on the same types of subject that are within the legislative competence of the provinces. The main exception is the natural resources (other than game) of the Territories. The general thrust of the Assembly in the past few years has been in the evolution of the N.W.T. toward responsible government and evenutally provincehood. In April 1979, John Parker was appointed commissioner.

The responsibilities of the territorial government embrace a wide variety of activities ranging from education, health, social services and housing to economic development, tourism, renewable resources and transportation. The budget of the N.W.T. government is about $300 million.

One of the responsibilities of the territorial government is the conservation of wildlife, which must be protected and managed as a resource upon which part of the population is dependent. In an effort, for example, to improve the method of identifying polar bear populations, sensitive radios have been placed on four bears, which can be tracked by satellite.

Another interesting aspect of the administration of affairs in the N.W.T. is the co-operative movement, which

has been of fundamental importance in the social and economic development of the territory during the past 20 years. It has, for example, been instrumental in bringing Inuit art to international attention. There are about 40 co-operatives, with a membership in excess of 3,600. The annual volume of business transacted in 1979 was $14.5 million, with 360 employees.

The Northwest Territories has two members of Parliament in the federal Parliament at Ottawa; they represent the ridings of Nunatsiaq (the Eastern Arctic) and Western Arctic. The population of each constituency is only 20,000 or so, compared to a national average in excess of 75,000, but the difficulty in representing such remote areas is onerous. The current member for Nunatsiaq is the first Inuit elected to the House of Commons. The N.W.T. also has one representative in the Senate of Canada, who is the first Inuit appointed to the Upper House.

Recreation and the arts

As development of the North has increased, so has the influx of visitors. Thirty-two communities in the N.W.T. now have hotels. There are also hunting and fishing lodges (most accessible only by air) and wilderness tours can be arranged.

There are three national parks in the N.W.T — Wood Buffalo, Nahanni and Auyuittuq (pronounced ah-you-ee-tuk). Wood Buffalo, which straddles A'berta's border, is the world's second largest park. Its 44,980 square kilometres are home for a variety of wild animals. The park was established in 1922 as a haven for Canada's last herd of 1,500 wild bison. Shortly thereafter 6,000 plains bison were brought in from central Alberta and the resulting hybrid animals today number 6,000. The park is the only breeding ground of the rare whooping crane, whose known population in the wild is 98.

Nahanni National Park in the southwest corner of the Territories covers 4,765 square kilometres. Because of its unique geology, the park, which was established in 1971, was entered in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's world heritage list in 1978, and was opened officially in 1979. One of the world's eight deepest canyons is found there. The South Nahanni River, a favourite of white water canoeists, has been known to rise more than 1.5 metres overnight from heavy rain. At Virginia Falls, the major cataract, the river plunges more than 90 metres -- twice the height of Niagara Falls.

The third national park Auyuittuq, "the place that never melts", straddles the Arctic Circle at the 66th parallel on the Cumberland Peninsula of Baffin Island. The park's 21,470 square kilometres experience 24 hours of daylight

from May through July and total darkness in mid-winter. Coronation, the park's largest glacier is 32 kilometres long and 3 kilometres wide.

Over the past 30 years a traditional form of northern recreation has blossomed into a modern business. The arts and crafts of the Northwest Territories not only display the skill of handcrafting but also provide an insight into a unique way of life. Many articles are crafted from leather, bone, stone and ivory.

The stone sculpture of the Inuit has become known in many areas of the world. The art depicts daily activities as well as mythological subjects and is often done in soapstone and serpentinite. The Inuit are also skilled printmakers, the first ones having been done from stencils cut in sealskin. Native arts and crafts, from sealskin mukluks to walrus tusk chess sets, garnered $9 million in sales in 1979.

* * *

In the years to come many decisions will be made affecting the Northwest Territories, its people and resources; decisions about pipelines, oil rigs, shipping lanes, caribou herds, highways and the rights of northerners. They will mark — one way or another — an end to the North's era of isolation and they will be felt well beyond its borders.

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